



# Living from the Heart

Take a class with Ross Rayburn for a playful, serious experience that helps you realize your full potential

By Libuse Binder

Ross Rayburn's 45 students had just completed a particularly difficult Anusara backbend series, and he had them take a break, lying on their stomachs with their eyes closed. Before long, a nondescript voice asked, "Can we do it again, Ross?" The class's collective groan, quickly changed to laughter as Rayburn piped up, "That was me guys. But we are still going to do it again." It was a potent reminder that while he is well-known for his lighthearted nature, his instruction is definitely no joke.

This upbeat combination of being inspiring, fun-loving, dynamic, and insightful has transformed Rayburn into a nationally renowned Anusara yoga instructor. Ever since he started teaching in Los Angeles nine years ago, he has found innovative ways to help his students strike a balance not just in the most challenging poses but also between the serious, philosophical side of yoga and its playful, humorous one. Rayburn's intention for his classes is to acknowledge each person's potential to be a more skillful practitioner, but more importantly, to gently remind students of their capacity to expand into their truest nature.

Rayburn, who currently teaches workshops

throughout the world, maintains a schedule from his home base in Los Angeles, while leading a teacher-training at Elements Yoga & Wellness Center in Darien, Connecticut. His accomplishments are especially impressive considering that he only started practicing yoga in 1997 to help rehabilitate a knee injury. His serious studies with John Friend began in 2000, and three years later, he became a certified Anusara instructor. He taught for five years at City Yoga in Los Angeles and, in 2004, opened his own studio, Yogainsideout, which he recently closed so he could travel and teach full-time.

Throughout this process, Rayburn has remained grounded and humble, even as his classes have evolved into dynamic explorations of what is possible. Here, Rayburn discusses how yoga allows us both to tap into our potential and to maintain balance in our lives.

**Fit Yoga:** *What first brought you to yoga?*

**Ross Rayburn:** I tore the meniscus in my knee after the California AIDS ride in 1997, and a friend suggested I try yoga. I was hooked from the beginning and started practicing all the time.

**FY:** *How did you meet Anusara Yoga founder John Friend, and how does he influence your teachings?*

**RR:** I first met him in 1999 and then started studying with him seriously in 2000. Although I loved Ashtanga and Iyengar, when I started studying with John, the classes with him opened new doors in really sweet ways. Because of the techniques that John teaches, I was able to do poses I had not been able to do before.

More importantly, the spiritual ideas behind Anusara completely resonated on a level I had not experienced before. There was a simplicity, goodness, and remembrance in the class in such a positive, life-affirming way. His classes set a nice path for me in a way that was not intimidating, but rather quite inspiring. In John's classes I found a new level of enthusiasm and contentment that I had not really experienced up to that point.

**FY:** *How did you make the transition from student to teacher?*

**RR:** I realized I had a teaching instinct when I was taking classes, and I would make little discoveries on my own that I thought could help others. I started to develop a teaching mindset, and although I initially loved it, the decision to teach was more pragmatic at first. I viewed it as a great way to pursue my acting career without waiting tables. There was a definite shift in this thinking after I started studying with John.

A major shift occurred when I spent a weekend assisting Desirée Rumbaugh at a therapy workshop. With a small alignment instruction, I was able to help a man who had been suffering from chronic sciatica for years. At that point, I only knew a tacit amount about the alignment principles [of Anusara Yoga], and I was more shocked than he was! The look of gratitude on his face had such an impact on me, and everything shifted. I thought, "You know what? This is something I could do for a really long time."

**FY:** *How has your approach to teaching and yoga changed over the years?*

**RR:** I actually love teaching now more than I ever have, and my teachers deserve a lot of credit for this. I think I am blessed with certain gifts, but the vast majority of my success is because I try to pay close attention to how other teachers teach, like John Friend, Gurumayi, Eric

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Schiffman, and Desirée. I have been taught generously by people who are interested in my growth, and by teachers who want the student to expand even beyond the teacher's level. That kind of generosity makes everyone want to expand. The ability to impact people's lives directly is what makes a career satisfying, whether it be teaching yoga or anything else.

**FY:** *How do you maintain your individuality while still following the parameters of an Anusara class?*

**RR:** Because John's methodology is so clear and is such good teaching, it actually becomes less about teaching the perfect Anusara class the way he would. Instead, the methods give me the freedom to be more myself. So many people try to be so individual that they lose a connection to what keeps them grounded, and it becomes more about the teacher than the student. I ground myself in Anusara principles with a great amount of diligence so I can be funny, creative, and teach in new and different ways.

**FY:** *How do you encourage your students to push themselves to the next level?*

**RR:** I learned the most skill and artistry from John Friend in terms of being sensitive to each student as a gift and discerning what each individual student needs. A class is not me imposing my will. Teaching is about finding the most service-oriented action in every moment. It is the same in life too. We listen first and find the best path before we act. Yoga teaches us to choose wisely; the right action is a lifelong quest for everybody.

**FY:** *You talk a lot about using your gifts to be of service and to make the world a better place. How do you recommend that people put the lessons from yoga to use in the world?*

**RR:** It is first important to acknowledge that we all have our gifts. As human beings, our nature and essence is full of blessing, power, abundance, wisdom, and abilities. We are also at the same time specific embodiments that all have different abilities, and we all have different frequencies to our offerings and our gifts.

It is not a question of whether or not actions to make the world better are possible. It is instead a question of

*Continued on page 95*

## Yoga Profile

Continued from page 15

manifestation. Any time something has to be manifested, it is important to pause, listen, and recognize. From an Anusara perspective, we call this Open to Grace. What it means is to open to the bigger context, the largest sense of who we are, both as individuals and as a people.

Sometimes, we have to soften to do that because we get so consumed with the “little stuff” that we have to back away for a moment to see the widest possible view. This has a foundational effect that makes you stronger and more tuned in. Once you have this clarity, you can make optimal choices and offerings. You will see your gifts more clearly and thus offer them more fully.

**FY:** *How does this offering connect to the idea of spirituality?*

**RR:** It is the intention of the divine that our individuality should shine. Spirituality is not just meditation and prayer. It is prayer, meditation, yoga, and relationships. It is all the things that connect us and help us to be better individuals, both in relationships and on our own. I like to say that being a spiritual person is being a good person. There is being, which is an action that has movement and takes participation. There is the word “good,” which puts a quality to that action.

Good is synonymous with spirit. In fact, it defines spirit. And then there is person—being a good person is an actual manifestation of that spirituality. Spirituality is not just doing asana or meditating, it is taking what you learn on your mat and applying it in jobs, relationships, and to strangers that you may not even know need you.

**FY:** *How have you handled the transition to traveling full-time?*

**RR:** Traveling is one of my favorite things because I meet so many

amazing people, and the workshop environment is so much fun. I do miss my students in LA, but I’m happier than I’ve ever been. I have to pinch myself because I am so lucky. I literally give thanks multiple times a day, and a lot of it goes to the fact that I have been fortunate with really good teachers.

It is a very simple formula for me: Surround yourself with good people, honor them and stay connected, and you will just be better off in what you have to offer.


**FY:** *What do you see for yourself in the future?*

**RR:** The way I look at the future is not so much where I see myself, but what I hope for—health, happiness, and to continue to live a good life filled with people, experiences, and celebratory times. I hope to stay grounded and balanced, so not only do I live a full life, but I inspire others to do the same. No matter what I see for myself in the future, it is important for me not to lose sight of simplicity, gratitude, abundance, and where I came from.

**FY:** *So humility and gratitude help you to maintain balance?*

**RR:** Humility reminds you of the bigger picture—that you are not the only one on the planet, as does gratitude in the sense of honoring other people who do good through their humor and diligence. Humility works because it softens our tendency to be overly individualistic. But at the same time, enthusiasm for life and wanting to succeed keeps us from being complacent.

**FY:** *That sounds like a good metaphor for a successful teaching career.*

**RR:** Yes, and more importantly, for life. 

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**Libuse Binder** is currently writing a book, *10 Ways to Change the World in Your 20s*. [www.tenways.org](http://www.tenways.org)

## Taxes for Teachers

Continued from page 83

your accountant the total each year. Keep track of what you spend on yourself *and* on others, as you may need to break it down at tax time.

### Doing the math


Deductions make a huge difference. “For every dollar of deductions, you are saving one dollar times your tax bracket,” says Blasi. That’s important to remember when you consider costly continuing education.

Say you want to do a month-long teacher training with a \$4,000 price tag. Let’s say you’re self-employed, in the 15% federal tax bracket, and pay 8% in state and

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city tax, as well as 15.3% in self-employment tax (one of the occupational hazards for freelancers).

Taking the cost of the training as a deduction on your tax return reduces your income by 38.3% of the total expense—resulting in a tax savings of more than \$1,500, notes CPA Albaum.

Studio owners should also consider the importance of income-tax education for their self-employed teachers. Last February, Connie Chan, founder of Levitate Yoga in New York City, provided for her teachers a tax workshop that was so well-received, she plans to offer another one this year. “Teachers loved the seminar, says Chan. “It’s free tax advice! They learned something that they could incorporate throughout the year.” 

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